AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Natasha C. Peake for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 6, 1996.
Title: The Hand of Humanity: Eliot's Religious Reformation in Middlemarch.

Abstract approved: Redacted for Privacy
Elizabeth Campbell

As the embodiment of the religiously unsettled Victorian Era in which she lived, George Eliot sought to discover a system of belief that would allow her to reaffirm and maintain her feelings of faith and morality. She believed that the subjective nature of traditional Christianity needed to be replaced with a more objective belief system, one centered on humanity--the Religion of Humanity.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the means in which Eliot discovers and establishes this new sense of religious order in Middlemarch by reforming and incorporating traditional religious images and rituals. Specifically, by drawing upon the practice of the laying on of hands found in all of the predominant Church rituals--the sacraments, Eliot demonstrates the major turning points in the life and faith of her main character, Dorothea Brooke. With the employment of this religiously suggestive gesture, the ability to successfully combine the traditional religious rituals and sense of order with a secular belief system is actualized.

Thus, by examining how Eliot relies on the laying on of hands to signify key moments in human existence, in much the same manner that Christianity does with the sacraments such as confirmation and ordination, we can attain a clearer understanding and appreciation of George Eliot's religious reformation in Middlemarch.

The Hand of Humanity: Eliot's Religious Reformation in Middlemarch

by

Natasha C. Peake

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Completed May 6, 1996
Commencement June 1996

Master of Arts thesis of Natasha C. Peake presented on May 6, 1996

APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Redacted for Privacy

Natasha C. Peake, Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Elizabeth Campbell, Dr. Lisa Ede, and Dr. Vicki Collins, for their constant support and insight. Also, I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Campbell; your confidence in me was largely responsible for my majoring in English, and your continued guidance and enthusiasm have played an integral role in my literary development.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Mom, Dad, and Mark who taught me by example the genuine power of love, faith, and perseverance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Introduction: Eliot's Hand at Reformation 1

Chapter 1
Accepting His Hand: Dorothea's Confirmation into the Order of Casaubon 9

Chapter 2
Her Hands are Tied: Dorothea's Faith in Transition 22

Chapter 3
With Outstretched Hands: Dorothea's Sacramental Embrace of Humanity 30

Chapter 4
Hands Joined: Eliot's Order of Humanity Realized 40

Bibliography 47

The Hand of Humanity: Eliot's Religious Reformation in Middlemarch

Introduction: Eliot's Hand at Reformation

Living in the midst of the spiritually uncertain and unstable Victorian Age, George Eliot embodies the compelling issues and concerns of her day. A devout member of the Evangelical movement within the Anglican Church during the early years of her life, Eliot ultimately spent the majority of her life searching for and constructing a belief system to replace the void left by her disenchantment with traditional, organized religion. Influenced by such Higher Criticism thinkers as Auguste Comte, David Friedrich Strauss, and Ludwig Feuerbach, all of whom provided philosophical examinations and explanations of the shortcomings of Christianity and advocated that the values conveyed through religion actually reside in the body of humanity, Eliot came to place her faith in the intrinsic goodness of humanity--otherwise known as the Religion of Humanity.[1] As Kerry McSweeney puts forth in her book entitled Middlemarch, Eliot's sense of the Religion of Humanity relied heavily on Feuerbach's beliefs:

> Feuerbach passionately argued that all of the enormous positive value of traditional Christianity could be recovered for the modern age once it was recognized that what earlier ages had regarded 'as objective, is now recognized as subjective; that is, what was formerly contemplated and worshipped as God is now perceived to be something *human* . . . The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man [and] contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of divine nature are, therefore, attributes of human nature.' (25)

---

[1] Eliot came to define "'religion' as individualized effort directed toward a larger human good, not egoistic concerns" (Jenkins 124).

Such a system of belief enabled Eliot to transfer her sense of belief and faith to a form of religion that did not oppose her intellectual or rational nature. Consequently, the Religion of Humanity came to serve as new religious *order,* for its doctrine gave an increased sense of coherence, assurance, stability, and organization and orderliness in life, similar to the belief system and sacramental rituals of traditional religion. Thus, with the Religion of Humanity, Eliot found that the order of life resided not in God or a divine being outside the human order, but in the order of humanity itself. This sense of order is depicted in all of her novels, coupled with typical religious imagery.

Perhaps the union of Eliot's more secular beliefs with religious--namely Christian--allusions seems peculiar. As Ruth Jenkins writes in Reclaiming Myths of Power, "Why, when she found organized religion ineffective and God untenable, does Eliot infuse religious allusions in her fiction? Her ethical beliefs must be considered in order to understand this paradoxical grafting of sacred to secular" (121). Jenkins' point is a valid one; examining Eliot's beliefs themselves does promise to shed light on her probable purpose. As Bernard J. Paris asserts in Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values, "[Eliot] did not feel that morality which bypassed Christianity, and with it much of the past and present culture of the race, could be adequate in the demands of the age" (89). Eliot does not wish to disregard all systems of belief that came before but rather explore their points of commonality and build upon them. Thus, it comes as little surprise that she incorporates numerous religious motifs in her fiction.

The importance of the countless religious references and allusions in Eliot's Middlemarch stands uncontested by the vast majority of literary critics.[2] Her references to St. Theresa of Avila (notably in the Prelude and Finale of the novel) are often cited and discussed by critics. With regard to the peripheral, yet significant, presence of St. Theresa who was a noted "reform[er] of a religious order," George Eliot's interests and intentions seem self-evident (3). She uses the reference as a means of setting the stage for her main character, Dorothea Brooke: "Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed" (4). This characterization, coupled with her depiction of a political and social climate preoccupied with reform, unquestionably illustrates Eliot's own belief in the importance of reformation--of overcoming the "inconsistency and formlessness" plaguing the Victorian Age and thus regaining the sense of "coherent social faith and order" which has been lost due in large part to the influence of Darwinism (and revolutionary theory in general) (3).

Perhaps the most effective means of examining Eliot's new religious order developed throughout Middlemarch is by first becoming familiar with the social atmosphere that Eliot was reacting to and the traditional religious doctrines and rituals that Eliot was borrowing from and expanding upon, as played out through her use of religious imagery. After all, as is the case with any means of reforming or reordering, we depend in large part on the structure of that which we are attempting to restructure.

---

[2] As T. R. Wright contends in "Middlemarch as a Religious Novel, or Life Without God," "Middlemarch has been called a 'novel of religious yearnings without religious object' . . . It is, however, a religious novel in the broad sense that it is concerned with religious need, the desire to find unity, meaning and purpose in life, in a world in which God, to use one of the key words in the novel, is a 'blank'" (138, 140).

Consequently, similarities between the old and new will exist, and these points of commonality and divergence, regardless how subtle, will allow for comparison. And of course, such juxtapositioning sheds valuable light on the motivations, intentions, and beliefs intrinsic to the particular reformation.

Christianity itself serves as a perfect example of the forces of reformation at work. Since the birth of the Christian movement, like every other social construction, the Church has been undergoing changes--some more drastic than others. The most notable alteration assumed the title of The Reformation (or more specifically The Protestant Reformation), which began in Germany with Martin Luther's proposals for reform of the Roman Catholic Church in 1517 and led to the institution of the Church of England as a Protestant faith. Within the present context, it is not necessary to possess a high level of familiarity with the logistics of this reordering of religion. Rather, it is enough to know that it happened and also to realize that the form of religion evolves--typically--in accordance with the needs of the society it serves. Thus, as St. Theresa holds a position in the history of religious reformation, so too does the Protestant movement and also George Eliot, each tearing down and building upon, modifying, the preceding traditions.

However, little attention has been paid to examining the traditional religious order and rituals that Eliot alludes to throughout the novel and the way in which she manipulates those traditional forms as a means of putting forth her alternative religion--The Religion of Humanity. This being the case, I think it would prove to be a compelling and enriching read to analyze the forms in question, namely the sacraments--or holy acts. After all, they have traditionally provided a sense of order and meaning in life. In fact, the terms Louis

Weil uses to describe such a religious framework emphasize the notion of continuity and order (both concerns presented and explored in Eliot's fiction): "The whole of that continuity [from the present Church back to the Apostles] involves, certainly the transmission of ministerial authority from one generation to the next through the laying on of hands" (28). Linking present to past, the sacraments offer believers a sense of stability and purpose, not to mention a sense of connection and inclusiveness with history and tradition.

Interestingly enough, the sacraments themselves have undergone a process of revision throughout history. While the Catholic Church believes there to be seven sacraments--baptism, the Eucharist, confirmation, penance, marriage, extreme unction, and ordination, the last also referred to as "holy orders"--its Protestant counterpart, the Church of England, has reduced the list to two--baptism and the Eucharist (Wolff 9). Essentially, this revision by the Protestant faith was deemed necessary since baptism and the Eucharist were the only acts sanctified by Christ himself.[3] Feuerbach even addresses these two sacraments, asserting that "In strictness there are only two sacraments, as there are two subjective elements in religion, Faith and Love" (236). However, compelling similarities exist among all seven of the Catholic sacraments and also those of the Anglican Church. The major source of parallelism comes with the ritual of the "laying on of hands." While this term is typically interchangeable with "confirmation" and "ordination," since the hands of the priest are literally placed upon the individual being confirmed, ordained or

[3] Donald M. Baillie explains that "A Christian sacrament has regularly been regarded by definition as a sacrament instituted by Christ, and the main reason why the Reformed Churches have usually limited the term to these two sacraments, and refused it to the other five, is because the other five cannot make a good claim to dominical institution" (56).

admitted into the ministry, this gesture is found throughout all of the holy acts, making it a religiously suggestive and important action. In addition, as defined in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, the laying on of hands is typically associated with "healings, blessings, baptism and the Spirit . . . There are underlying unifying characteristics. The context is always religious, . . . and obviously the laying on of hands is a symbolic action" (48). All of these aspects of the definition of the laying on of hands find their basis in the ministry of Christ in the New Testament.[4]

As outlined in The Book of Common Prayer, the official source for the Anglican order of worship and thus for Eliot's early brand of Evangelicalism, all of the Church rituals (the seven original sacraments included) incorporate the laying on of hands as a means of demonstrating the sense of fellowship, belonging, and closure related to the specific ceremony undertaken. Regardless of when or where in the specific service the laying on of hands takes place (typically it occurs at the middle or end), the gesture serves as the climactic moment of the entire event. For example, during confirmation upon laying his hand on the individual taking part in confirmation, the bishop proclaims, "We make our humble supplications unto thee [God] for these children, unto whom (after example of thy holy Apostles) we have laid our hands, to certify them (by this sign) of thy favor and gracious goodness toward them. Let thy fatherly hand, we beseech thee, ever be over

[4] For example, in Hebrews 6:1-2 the importance of the laying on of hands is evident: "Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgement." In addition, Acts 8:17 portrays the relevancy of this action: "Then laid they their hands on them, and they received the Holy Ghost."

them" (288).[5] The hand gesture acts as a visual seal of sorts of the covenant between believers and the object of their faith--God. Connected to this image, as Marjorie Warkentin points out, is the notion that "the hand of God is that through which his Will is performed" (111).

My purpose is to show that Eliot's use of hand imagery allows her to situate herself within the tradition of further sacramental revision. Shifting the emphasis from that of God and Christ, Eliot's sacraments--acts complete with the symbolic laying on of hands--assume a secular emphasis. Such laying on of hands comes to serve as confirmation of the sacred and divine spirit and nature of humanity that both Eliot and Feuerbach advocated. As Feuerbach stated, "the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species; . . . that there is no other essence which man can think, dream of, imagine, feel, believe in, wish for, love and adore as the absolute, than the essence of human nature itself" (270). Focusing her reforming of the sacramental order particularly on the institutions of confirmation, marriage, and ordination, Eliot clearly presents her emphasis upon divinity as located not in God, but in collective humanity. It comes as little surprise that Dorothea Brooke, our "latter-day Saint Theresa," serves as the vehicle through which this doctrine is tested and decreed.[6] Hence, analyzing this seemingly insignificant gesture in the specific circumstances concerning Dorothea and considering the resulting implications surrounding such occurrences provides an enriching view into the development of our heroine and ultimately the logistics of Eliot's Religion of

---

[5] As Evan Daniel points out in The Prayer-Book: Its History, Language, and Content, "Confirmation was practised in earlier times under other names, such as 'the imposition of hands,' 'chrism,' and 'the seal'" (482).

[6] After all, according to T. R. Wright, "it is with Dorothea's religious aspirations that the novel is most concerned" (142).

Humanity. What is more, it is worth noting that Eliot portrays sacramental humanism by focusing on and depicting the hands of numerous characters. For example, Lydgate's hands are described early on as "large solid white hands," a depiction that is only fitting for a doctor--a healer (114). Thus, the laying on of hands and all the significance embodied in such a gesture clearly reside in the body of humanity.

Dorothea's religious fervor is set up early on in Middlemarch, as is the metaphoric significance of hands; "[Dorothea's] were not thin hands, or small hands; but powerful, feminine, maternal hands" (38). This passage proves particularly telling for it combines the notions of femininity, strength, and motherhood, which are all important characteristics that prove to be synonymous with Dorothea. Since Middlemarch, among other things, is about the religious development of Dorothea Brooke, which suggests specific, individual stages toward a presumably desired end or product, her evolution should be examined in such terms. The sacraments--whose function among other things is to mark the major transitions in a Christian's life and consequently impose a sense of order onto life itself--provide a fitting means of analyzing Dorothea's progress and also Eliot's reforming of religious doctrine and practice--one more tailored to the specific needs and concerns of her age.

Chapter 1

Accepting His Hand: Dorothea's Confirmation into the Order of Casaubon

The dramatic event that dominates the opening of Middlemarch is Dorothea Brooke's acceptance of the hand of the elderly clergyman Edward Casaubon, who "press[es] her hand between his hands" when she accepts his proposal of marriage (50). This event comes to serve as "confirmation" for Dorothea, for by joining hands with him, she commits herself to his religious system of beliefs and also to the order of matrimony. Eliot has fused the sacraments of confirmation and matrimony. Consequently, Dorothea comes to enter her marriage with Casaubon possessing expectations similar to the characteristics of traditional confirmation, for as discussed in The Book of Common Prayer, the individuals being confirmed promise, "with their own consent," to "evermore endeavor themselves faithfully to observe and keep such things as they by their own mouth and confession have assented to" (283). Also, the people being confirmed "[receive] strength and defense against all temptations to sin, and the assaults of the world by "openly profess[ing] their own faith" (283). Such characterizations of strength, faith, even increased understanding, all beautifully represent Dorothea's goals and expectations.

Nonetheless, perhaps it seems peculiar, even unnecessary, to speak of Dorothea confirming her faith when, she, from the opening pages of Middlemarch is depicted in terms more religious than any of the other primary characters. And yet, relatively little is disclosed about Dorothea's intellectual or religious background or her particular beliefs in the early sections of the novel. However, if we remind ourselves of the implications of confirmation, the public and conscious assertion of one's faith that is required, then the

necessity for some level of pre-existing religious belief from which to build and the ongoing nature of this stage in religious development become apparent. And thus "A young lady . . . who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostle" presents herself as the logical candidate to examine under the formulative lens of sacramental order (9).

Throughout Dorothea's initial confirmation process (for as we shall see, her religious progress comprises several confirmations), numerous instances of hand-laying occur. By analyzing these major occurrences, a pattern of our heroine's development begins to emerge, for the action--as with the traditional laying on of hands--appears during key moments in Dorothea's life. When Dorothea first becomes aware of the possibility that Casaubon might ask her to be his wife, the hand imagery she utilizes to describe his interest suggests a divine dispensation: "How good of him--nay, it would be almost as if a winged messenger had suddenly stood beside her path and held out his hand towards her"; he would be "as instructive as Milton's 'affable archangel'" (28, 24). Viewing Casaubon as a God-send, Dorothea believes him to be the fatherly husband she had always desired: "The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it" (10). Clearly, Dorothea's ideal husband embodies traditional religious thought, complete with a working knowledge of Hebrew.

Interestingly enough, many critics have commented on Dorothea's initial egotistical nature as characterized in her desire to marry Casaubon. In "The Image of St. Theresa in Middlemarch and Positive Ethics," Franklin Court claims that she is initially

"self-centered and insincere" (24). However, Court contends that Dorothea's egoism is "not the simple egoism of self-interest or self-gratification . . . It is an egoism of illusory religious conception of the world, a passion for martyrdom, for religious service and self-mortification. It is a type of self-indulgent involvement with religion" (24). Even Dorothea's sense of self-interest can be attributed to her religious zeal, a trait Feuerbach would argue to be characteristic of all conventional religion.[7]

And so, this concept of personal motivation and gain plays a large role in her desire to marry Casaubon; "'I should learn everything then,' she said to herself . . . 'It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by'" (29). Dorothea's emphasis here is definitely on self-improvement, not love, affection, or even the desire to help another person--although the last is arguably a secondary consideration. These sentiments are articulated further when she explains to her uncle Mr. Brooke, that "'I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgment and in all knowledge'" (40). Although such a characterization was probably typical for a historical era that offered comparatively few educational opportunities for women, this passage is embellished with religious implication and metaphor. The husband portrayed here beautifully echoes the primary attribute of God--the possessor of ultimate judgment and knowledge. More is at stake than the union between two individuals. Casaubon is to serve as a guide, "the earthly guardian of [her] welfare" and his being a renowned religious scholar is a particularly pertinent characteristic (44).

---

[7] As Feuerbach discusses in The Essence of Christianity, "Faith [in the typical religious sense] is arrogant, but it is distinguished from natural arrogance in this, that it clothes its feeling of superiority, its pride, in the idea of another person. . . . This distinct person, however, is simply his own hidden self, his personified, contended desire of happiness" (250).

Consequently, Casaubon comes to stand for more than a mere husband; he is symbolically equated with traditional religion, the Christian Church.[8] By having faith in him, Dorothea demonstrates her belief in the Church: "She filled up all blanks with unmanifested perfections, interpreting him as she interpreted the works of Providence" (75). "Dorothea's faith supplied all that Mr Casaubon's words seemed to leave unsaid: what believer sees a disturbing omission of infelicity? The text, whether of prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it, and even his bad grammar is sublime" (50). Eliot seems to be hinting at the blind faith customarily required with religion, which Dorothea--at least initially--demonstrates toward Casaubon. As T. R. Wright asserts, "Dorothea's belief in Casaubon is described in terms analogous to religious faith. . . . Faith, it seems, whether in people or in God, is a matter of filling up blanks" (143). Thus, by taking his hand in matrimony, Dorothea comes to confirm her faith and position in the belief system that Casaubon represents.

However, Dorothea is not content with mere blind faith. As we have discussed earlier, she is interested in self-improvement, namely through the attainment of knowledge. She does not want to be ultimately dependent on Casaubon for her means of salvation. Because of this, "[I]t was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly" (64). Dorothea wants

---

[8] Ruth Jenkins believes that Casaubon is "the character who best symbolizes the Established Church," and through his characterization, Eliot demonstrates early on in the novel the need for reform, for Casaubon is "antiquated, impotent and egoistic" (Jenkins 129). In addition, the relationship Eliot sets up between Dorothea and Casaubon mirrors that described in The Book of Common Prayer, where matrimony signifies "the mystical union, that is betwixt Christ and his Church" (290).

and needs a husband who possesses a greater degree of knowledge than herself so she can improve her own understanding and attain truth:

> Perhaps even Hebrew might be necessary--at least the alphabet and a few roots--in order to arrive at the core of things, and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian. And she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband; she wished, poor child, to be wise herself. (64)

She does not want to ultimately rely upon her husband for judgment but rather possess such a mental capacity herself. This desired degree of involvement and commitment hints at higher aspirations--perhaps a form of ordination, a development which would complement Eliot's allusions to St. Theresa. With such an understanding, Mrs. Cadwallader's cynical comment that "'marriage to Casaubon is as good as going to a nunnery'" assumes an increased amount of importance and even foreshadowing (59). Thus, confirmed into the traditional faith through Casaubon's marriage proposal, Dorothea appears to possess great promise of advancing in this religious order and achieving, at least metaphorically, ordination.

Yet, fairly early on in their marriage, both husband and wife are depicted as disillusioned with the other; both have fallen short of the other's expectations. Dorothea's discontent with Casaubon comes to symbolize her disappointment in the faith he represents. Although she has been confirmed into Casaubon's religious order, she appears to be a reluctant novitiate. Since the faith Casaubon provides seems inadequate for his wife, it seems highly unlikely that Dorothea will ever be ordained into such a religious order. Dorothea has not been able to assume as active a role in her husband's work as she had hoped, and Casaubon is having difficulty adjusting to a wife who is not altogether

submissive, but rather has thoughts and beliefs that he deems threatening and counter to his own. Being questioned about his work puts Casaubon ill at ease. In fact, he comes to see Dorothea not only as his wife but also "a personification of that shallow world which surrounds the ill-appreciated or desponding author" (201). Apparently, he does not share Dorothea's view that she had entered "into some fellowship with her husband's chief interests" (201). Casaubon definitely believes that a hierarchy exists, with him on top of course, and Dorothea's inquiries seem to border on blasphemy for him.

Disenchanted as she is with her husband, Dorothea still demonstrates her trademark characteristics of compassion and sympathy.[9] As the narrator reflects, "Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible for her" (194). Dorothea makes every effort to retain a sense of order in her life, an order complete with love--at least what she deems to be love (the term still is not directed specifically to Casaubon as an individual). Our newly confirmed Dorothea beautifully demonstrates the degree of her commitment as basically desperate and hopeless when she asks Will Ladislaw to promise to never again discuss Casaubon's writing. This compassionate request is accompanied by a significant hand gesture: "Dorothea gave him her hand, and they exchanged a simple 'Good-bye'" (224). With this seemingly unassuming gesture, Dorothea manages to solidify a bond of understanding with Will; she calls upon him to acknowledge--and at least outwardly respect--the order that Casaubon represents. Also, and perhaps more telling, the joining of hands with Will (who comes to

---

[9] As Franklin Court contends, "'Sympathy is a key word in Eliot's philosophical lexicon. To possess sympathy means to have the ability to extend the feelings until they embrace the needs, the joys, the sorrows, of mankind. Practicing sympathy with mankind subsequently enables the individual to subdue the self-serving ego. . . . To be 'real' one must learn to live in others" (23). Dorothea is well on her way to becoming a believer in the Religion of Humanity.

represent humanity in much the same way as Casaubon symbolizes traditional religion) hints at the transformation and shift in devotion that Dorothea in fact will undergo later in the novel and foreshadows the ultimate relationship that will develop between Dorothea and Will.[10] The seed has been sown, complete with the hand gesture, here. But at this stage in Middlemarch, Dorothea's actions, above all, demonstrate her allegiance with and continued devotion to her husband; nevertheless, her sincere desire to better the lives of others begins to emerge.

But just how successful is Dorothea at actually maintaining her faith in her marriage and the consequent belief system it exemplifies? "The clear heights where she expected to walk in full communion had become difficult to see even in her imagination; the delicious repose of the soul on a complete superior had been shaken into uneasy effort and alarmed with dim presentiment" (274). The reality of their relationship has fallen short of the "spiritual communion" she hoped to share with Casaubon.

Dorothea's dissatisfaction and uncertainty are understandable, especially when viewed in light of her husband's own bouts of doubt in faith. As the narrator reflects, "[E]ven his religious faith wavered with his wavering trust in his own authorship; and the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the immortality of the still unwritten Key to all Mythologies" (280). Even Casaubon has questioned the religious order he is attempting to outline and reconstruct in his writing.

It is through this unsettling stage in Dorothea's life that much is disclosed about her innate character and her spiritual development. In this uncertain climate of faith,

---

[10] In fact, T. R. Wright contends that "Will can be seen as a priest-like figure in the Religion of Humanity," although the degree of Will's initial involvement (prior to Dorothea's influence) is debatable (149).

Dorothea comes to articulate "a belief of [her] own" to Will (392). Dorothea has begun to reconfigure her belief system within the parameters set forth by Casaubon's order. This faith, which appears to provide her with a sense of solace, makes her uncertainties bearable: "'That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil--widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower'" (392). Dorothea's personal doctrine of belief contains the all-important component--faith in what cannot be clearly understood or explained. The personalized touch comes in the idea that humanity is somehow "a part of the divine power," that the objects of faith can be found in each of us and in humanity collectively. The values of life reside in this earthly world. After all, as Feuerbach put forth, "the consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species; . . . that there is no other essence which man can think, dream of, imagine, feel, believe in, wish for, love and adore as the absolute, than the essence of human nature itself" (270).

The multifaceted nature of Dorothea's faith continues to materialize through the laying on of hands motif when Casaubon learns the precarious state of his health. Dorothea appears angelic in the concern she expresses: "she went towards him, and might have represented a heaven-sent angel coming with a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love which clings the closer to a comprehended grief" (425). As the narrator suggests here, Dorothea embodies love, faith, and sense of mutual understanding. These sentiments are accompanied with her outward show of support--passing "her hand through his arm" (425). However, Casaubon

responds to this gesture coldly. "There was something horrible to Dorothea in the sensation which this unresponsive hardness inflicted on her" (425). She does not comment on his behavior but rather "withdrew her arm and lingered on the matting, that she might leave her husband quite free," which is what Casaubon desired (425). Just as the laying on of the hand by Dorothea demonstrated her concern and feeling of fellowship, the release of her hand symbolizes the growing distance between husband and wife.

Because of this breakdown in ideology, it comes as little surprise that Dorothea finds herself unable to immediately consent to Casaubon's demands--demands that she assumes will bind her to carrying on her husband's theological writing--when he discusses what he wishes to happen in the event of his death. Any blind faith that she possessed in regard to her husband has been irrevocably called into question and undermined, as we have witnessed. Consequently, when Casaubon states, "'It is that you will let me know, deliberately, whether, in case of my death, you will carry out my wishes: whether you will avoid doing what I should deprecate, and apply yourself to do what I should desire,'" Dorothea hesitates in giving her reply (477). Casaubon is basically seeking reconfirmation of Dorothea's faith in and commitment to him and his work. He wants her to give him her pledge to "deliberately" and consciously abide by his doctrine, even after his death. By consenting, Dorothea would become Casaubon's nun--the upholder of his beliefs. She would continue his work by finishing the writing of his Key to All Mythologies and in so doing she would be contributing her hands to the religious doctrine Casaubon represents. Compliance to such a request metaphorically mirrors ordination.

Dorothea's hesitancy in complying suggests that she is now shrinking from ordination. In an attempt to explain her sense of reluctance in responding to Casaubon's repeated requests, Dorothea replies, "'No, I do not yet refuse, . . . but it is too solemn--I think it is not right--to make a promise when I am ignorant what it will bind me to. Whatever affection prompted I would do without promising'" (478). Dorothea does not wish to bind herself to anything that she does not have utter faith in; she even speaks of such an act in moral terms by stating that it would not be "right." Obviously, she is working from a belief system that is not merely a template of her husband's. Answering to this, Casaubon retorts, "'But you would use your own judgment: I ask you to obey mine; you refuse'" (478). His rebuttal functions on various levels. It appears customary for a husband, of the Victorian times particularly, to expect his wife to follow his judgment irreputably and irrefutably. After all, according to The Book of Common Prayer, the traditional oath taken by a woman during the sacrament of marriage included obeying one's husband as one of the first responsibilities named: "Wilt thou obey him and serve him, love, honor, and keep him, in sickness, and in health?" (293). And yet, this exchange between Casaubon and Dorothea is not merely a question of him exerting his will. Indeed, Casaubon wants Dorothea, without reservation, to promise to do his will, but his request does not appear unreasonable when viewed in the light of her already being confirmed into the faith. The expectations that he holds for her could be interpreted as a mere extension of her already affirmed belief in him and all he represents. Of course, one could dismiss such a reading on the grounds that Casaubon is being conniving in his method of having Dorothea take on this pledge of allegiance. After all, if he believed her faith in him to be

sound, why would he resort to such tactics? Would he not just assume that she would continue his work or, at least upon asking her, disclose some of the particulars of his request? The answer is a resounding "No!" The sense of fellowship and trust that Casaubon expects from Dorothea mirrors that assumed between Church and congregation, God and believer. Having confirmed her--complete with the sanctifying gesture of laying his hands upon her--into the religious order and faith that he has set forth, it is only logical for him to wish Dorothea to outwardly proclaim her faith once again. What better way to demonstrate such belief than by literally promising to live by the undisclosed and unexplained will of another? Casaubon is merely asking Dorothea to take the next step in belief, a form of ordination.

Of course, we (as readers), along with Dorothea, know of the sense of doubt and disappointment in her matrimonial union--and fellowship--that she has felt. Consequently, her hesitation in answering to her husband's demands seems well-founded and within character. Her ultimate decision to agree to his demands, consent "to a fellowship from which she shrank," however, is ironically representative of her own belief system based on doing good for the betterment of other rather than on her unyielding faith in her husband's religious order (481). As the narrator reflects, "Neither law nor the world's opinion compelled her to this--only her husband's nature and her own compassion, only the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage" (481). She acts not out of faith but rather "compassion." And tellingly, when Dorothea goes to give her answer to Casaubon, "She laid her hand on his shoulder" (482). But this ritual gesture comes too late; she is never able to promise Casaubon what he wishes because of his death.

This laying on of hands carries several implications. First of all, Dorothea, in committing the act, reiterates the fact that she embodies an alternate belief system. After all, if she were taking on the orders that Casaubon advocated, then it should be Casaubon who performed the laying on of the hands, not Dorothea. Instead, Casaubon's gesture comes to resemble the allusion in the title of this book of the novel, "The Dead Hand." Casaubon, by requesting such a pledge from Dorothea, was wishing to have a permanent hand--one which transcended his own death--laid on his wife. Such a request fittingly echoes the sentiments and expectations expressed in the confirmation ceremony depicted in The Book of Common Prayer: "Let thy fatherly hand, we beseech thee, ever be over them" (288). However, instead of proclaiming her faith in her husband and becoming a sort of saint-like figure in his religious order, Dorothea asserts the validity and strength present in her own belief system, beliefs which up until the death of her husband have had to exist within the confines of the order he provided.

Consequently, it seems that "his cold grasp on Dorothea's life . . . [has] slipped away" (493). And with this slipping away of Casaubon's authority and sense of order comes the opportunity for Dorothea to reconfigure and reorder her own life and belief system.

> Bound by a pledge given from the depths of her pity, she would have been capable of undertaking a toil which her judgment whispered was vain for all uses except that consecration of faithfulness which is a supreme use. But now her judgment, instead of being controlled by duteous devotion, was made active by the embittering discovery that in her past union there had lurked the hidden alienation of secrecy and suspicion. (493)

Now acquainted with the codicil to her husband's will, which we shall discuss in more detail later, that specifically forbids her to marry Will Ladislaw, Dorothea discovers the extent of Casaubon's suspicion of and distrust in her. Believing in the sanctity and importance of faithfulness, Dorothea ultimately finds herself unable to honor Casaubon's wishes because of the distrust he harbored for her. She has come to truly understand the integral relationship between faith and trust. With this discovery, she has reached a rite of passage. Ironically, the path Casaubon constructed to lead to Dorothea's symbolic ordination has instead led her to a new form of confirmation, a new religious order that she must discover for herself--in order to be the foundress not of nothing, but rather of herself. The "dead hand" of Casaubon's traditional, religious ideology has finally loosened its grip and Dorothea is left to construct her own order--one which will allow her to instill her faith in something more sound and unassuming.

Chapter 2

Her Hands are Tied: Dorothea's Faith in Transition

Although Casaubon's belief system has been called into serious question by Dorothea, she finds herself unable to immediately and decisively abandon it. And rightly so. Even though her faith in him has been subverted, the belief and trust entailed in resurrecting a comparable doctrine to fill the resulting void in her life requires time. The establishment of and ultimate confirmation into a new order of faith must be a relatively gradual, perhaps even slow, process. And this second stage in Dorothea's growth proves to follow such a structure. Dependent on the sense of order, as arguably all individuals are to varying degrees, Dorothea must temporarily continue to rely, at least partially, on the form that Casaubon imposed on her life. In fact, the telling moment in her growth and confirmation will prove to be when she frees herself entirely of Casaubon's order, but for now we must direct our attention to the subtle changes in Dorothea's religious configuration--the process itself--and examine her motivations.

Dorothea's first substantial act after her husband's death is appointing a clergyman for Lowick parish as his successor, and it seems only fitting that she should be dealing with her late husband's religious concerns, even if she had failed to be ordained into Casaubon's Church. After all, she never outwardly refused her husband. Her sense of doubt and betrayal are only conveyed to the reader through the omniscient narrator. Thus, after discussing the topic of the rectory with her uncle, who recommends Mr Tyke, Dorothea replies, "'I should like to have a fuller knowledge about him, uncle, and judge for myself, if Mr Casaubon has not left any expression of his wishes [among his papers]'"

(488). True to character, she desires to follow her own line of reason, but only if her husband did not provide his own. In this sentiment, Dorothea's former sense of duty and submission to her husband's wishes presents itself. She expresses apparent willingness in this instance to abide by the wishes of her husband at the direct expense of denying her own judgment. Consequently, even though this reply appears at first glance to be a submission on Dorothea's part to the desires of her now deceased husband, it more importantly serves as a testimonial of Dorothea's sense of personal judgment. It is this distinction between her judgment and that of Casaubon's which will inevitably allow her to reconfigure her own life and order of belief and faith. But for the present, Casaubon still has a hand on Dorothea's life through his written requests, namely his will.

Nevertheless, her eventual choice for her husband's position, Mr Farebrother, hints that Dorothea is in the process of reforming her faith. Speaking with great admiration for Farebrother, Lydgate tells Dorothea that "'I never heard such good preaching as his--such plain, easy eloquence. He would have done to preach at St Paul's Cross after old Latimer. His talk is just as good about all subjects: original, simple, clear'" (494). This passage suggests that Farebrother is linked to the old, traditional order of religion, while his originality hints at the idea of reform. The similarities in this characterization with that of Dorothea's initial depiction are irrefutable, for both have the interesting combination of the new and the old. Continuing his recommendation, Lydgate states,

> 'I don't pretend to say that Farebrother is apostolic . . . His position is not quite like that of the Apostles: he is only a parson among parishioners whose lives he has to try and make better. Practically I find that what is called being apostolic now, is an impatience of everything in which the parson doesn't cut the principal figure. I see something of that in Mr Tyke at the Hospital: a good deal of his doctrine is a sort of pinching hard to make people uncomfortably aware of him. Besides, an

> apostolic man at Lowick!--he ought to think, as St Francis did, that it is needful to preach to the birds.' (495).

Farebrother, as his very name suggests, puts great emphasis on the well-being of his parishioners; he is concerned with the quality of their daily lives. His need "to try and make better" those lives echoes the sentiments expressed early on by Dorothea herself: "'I should like to make life beautiful--I mean everybody's life'" (219). This similarity shared by Farebrother and Dorothea invites juxtapositioning. They are kindred spirits. While Dorothea's religious evolution comprises one of the primary storylines in Middlemarch, Farebrother is presented with his belief fully intact. Very little about the process in which he arrived at his sense of religious order is disclosed, but his belief system stands as a possible goal for Dorothea. In fact, Farebrother commits one of the most notable laying on of hands in the novel. After uttering his words of warning to Fred Vincy about taking Mary Garth's love for granted,

> He paused . . . and he put out his hand, as if to imply that the conversation was closed. Fred was moved quite newly. Some one highly susceptible to the contemplation of a fine act has said, that it produces a sort of regenerating shudder through the frame, and makes one feel ready to begin a new life. A good degree of that effect was just then present in Fred Vincy. (676)

Eliot characterizes Farebrother and Fred's confrontation in images and terms which clearly suggest confirmation. The minister's laying on of hands causes Fred to feel that he is embarking on a new life. Although the gesture itself may seem simple as a ritual, Farebrother's touch heals Fred. Such a "regenerating" effect truly portrays the sacramental impact of Farebrother's humanistic laying on of hands. Consequently, it is no

small coincidence that Dorothea becomes acquainted with Farebrother after Casaubon's death, for only now is she susceptible to the merits of the order which Farebrother offers.

However, the belief system that Farebrother represents is not all that sparks Dorothea's interest in him. Rather, the "strong desire to rescue him from his chance-gotten money" playing whist serves as an important motivational factor. She wants to better the life of another (495). Harboring such emotions, Dorothea's interest in Farebrother and her ultimate approval of him come as little surprise. She is in quest of a better religious system, one that provides the largest quantity of good for the greatest number. Thus, by expressing an interest in Farebrother's preaching and a desire (even need) to aid in improving his quality of life, Dorothea demonstrates her level of commitment in recognizing and establishing her own religious order.

Searching for the manifestation of this new faith and sense of order in her life, Dorothea still finds herself constricted to a large extent by the order imposed by Casaubon; she is after all his widow. In fact, its binding nature is reflected in Eliot's manipulation of the laying on of hands motif. Feeling unable to truly and unreservedly act upon her own will and judgment, Dorothea illustrates her sense of confinement and her strong desire to free herself from it when she writes a reply to her husband, now deceased. "The 'Synoptical Tabulation for the use of Mrs Casaubon'"--the only note she found addressed to herself among her husband's papers--"she carefully enclosed and sealed, writing within the envelope," the following:

> I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?--Dorothea. (539)

Writing this response down in her own hand obviously serves Dorothea's needs, for it acts as a means of demonstrating retaliation and personal power--if only to herself. Much is at stake here, for Dorothea sees her participation in something for which she has no belief as putting her very soul in peril. Thus, the gesture ultimately reiterates how Dorothea has diverged from Casaubon's religious faith, as represented through his fruitless, lifelong work.

Even though Dorothea has progressed enough to voice her opposing views, by writing notes to herself and outwardly by refusing to continue her husband's work, she still finds herself ensnared by Casaubon's order, namely under the guise of the codicil to his will. Casaubon has bound Dorothea's hands, for he specifically states in his codicil that if she chooses to join hands with Will Ladislaw in holy matrimony, then she will forfeit all rights to the estate Casaubon has left her. Thus, his authoritative structure remains, relatively speaking, intact. Dorothea, at least at this stage in her development, can only act upon her free will within the parameters defined by her position as Casaubon's widow. She must consequently act and move only within the constraints of her position; she is unable to do what she truly desires and feels called upon to do--help Will Ladislaw.

Up to this point in the novel, Dorothea has not thought of Will in romantic terms; in fact, she appears appalled at the prospect suggested by Casaubon's codicil: "It had never before entered her mind that he could under any circumstances, be her lover: conceive the effect of the sudden revelation that another had thought of him in that light" (490). Rather, she has thought of him in terms of how he and his family had been

wronged; Dorothea, from the first moment she became aware of Will's background, has been a strong advocate of his cause, wishing to aid him in bettering his position. And yet, in one fell swoop, Casaubon makes such assistance impossible for Dorothea. For by including such a specific stipulation about Dorothea possibly remarrying, Casaubon successfully casts suspicion and doubt on any generosity that Dorothea may wish to present to Will. The order that Dorothea was confirmed into with her marriage to her late husband maintains its primary grasp through the guidelines of his will (how fitting that his *will* should be the controller of her life) and the expectations and conventions that society holds on a widow.

Dorothea finds herself constrained, unable to fully act on her own accord. "The longing was to see Will Ladislaw. She did not know any good that could come of their meeting: she was helpless; her hands had been tied from making up to him for any unfairness in his lot. But her soul thirsted to see him" (539). Her hands, which have been depicted as strong, comforting, and confirming, are now bound. By portraying Dorothea as "helpless," unable to act on her own behalf, let alone anyone else's, Eliot's vivid imagery illustrates the extent of Dorothea's mental and emotional deviation from the psychology and beliefs of Casaubon's system. Rather than feeling validated and liberated, Dorothea views herself as constricted and confined by this order that has come to define her life. But Dorothea's sense of uselessness and her strong desire to see Will are not the only telling aspects of this passage; "her soul thirsted to see him." Her strong yearning and need to meet with Will are conveyed in religious and life-sustaining terms--soul and thirst. Having faith in him serves as a means of enrichment for her.

However, Dorothea is unable to express her feelings, feelings that she is not entirely aware of herself. In fact, she finds herself only able to speak of this topic in very vague terms with Will: "'Sorrow comes in so many ways. Two years ago I had no notion of that--I mean of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak'" (545). Both are bound by their positions, and so Dorothea finds herself only capable of comforting Will vicariously through the picture of his Aunt Julia: "she [Dorothea] took the little oval picture in her palm and made a bed for it there, and leaned her cheek upon it, as if that would soothe the creature who had suffered unjust condemnation" (548). By symbolically taking this forsaken soul in her hand, cradling her, Dorothea illustrates her strong desire to break free and support Will. Yet, she lacks the fortitude to commit to such a potentially condemning act--giving Will money that she believes to be rightfully his. For the present, Dorothea's desire to aid Will, to step out of the prescriptive expectations of society and Casaubon, once again finds itself undermined by the traditional sense of order.

Consequently, taking all of this into consideration, it seems safe to assume that Dorothea's relations, and ultimate relationship, with Will will provide her with the elements necessary to construct a new sense of order for herself. Of course, the whole issue with Will seems clouded or complicated by our heroine's unawareness of the extent and depth of her feelings for him, but such a realization will come to serve as a testament of Dorothea's readiness and ability to participate in a new form of order. Thus, it is only fitting that the culminating factor--event--that leads to Dorothea's ultimate conversion and

confirmation into a new faith should include Will as the catalyst since he has come to embody Dorothea's confinement under Casaubon's system of beliefs.

Chapter 3

With Outstretched Hands: Dorothea's Sacramental Embrace of Humanity

With Will serving as an important factor in Dorothea's religious transformation, her quest for reconfirmation of her life and faith in it, it is only logical to examine the circumstances that Eliot creates which provide Dorothea with the opportunity of becoming the foundress of herself. Consequently, Dorothea's determination to clear Lydgate's name comes to serve as her ultimate means of accomplishing such a goal. To begin with, her unquestioning defense of Lydgate stands as a perfect example of her strong desire and need to lend her fellow man a helping hand; but more importantly, it portrays Dorothea's intrinsic belief in the goodness of humanity. Dorothea, who fittingly enough joins forces with Farebrother to rectify Lydgate's reputation, proclaims to Farebrother, "'You don't believe that Mr Lydgate is guilty of anything base? I will not believe it. Let us find out the truth and clear him!'" (730). Placing her faith in the integrity of humanity, as embodied by Lydgate at least, Dorothea equates truth with her faith. Her devotion, similar to traditional, religious devotion, presents itself as unconditional, existing beyond the grasp of doubt. Because of the level and fervor of her belief, Dorothea finds herself discontented for the first time with Farebrother, who wishes to assume a more cautious approach than our heroine: "She disliked this cautious weighing of consequences, instead of an ardent faith in efforts of justice and mercy, which would conquer by their emotional force" (733). And so she passionately answers Farebrother's reluctance with the declaration, "'Oh, how cruel!' . . . clasping her hands. 'And would you not like to be the one person who believed in that man's innocence if the

rest of the world belied him?" (734). By punctuating her remark by clasping her hands, Dorothea verifies how she has assumed responsibility for Lydgate's social salvation.

With such noble intentions, Dorothea wins Lydgate's confidence and tells him that she has complete faith in him. As U. C. Knoepflmacher discloses in Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel, "After Lydgate's confession, the young priestess promises absolution. She will vindicate him before Rosamond [his wife] and 'in a few other minds.' In George Eliot's religion of humanity, man's exoneration can only come from his fellow men" (95). Presented with this belief, Lydgate reflects that "'This young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary'" (768).[11] And the religious symbolism does not stop there; the narrator comments, with reference to Dorothea, "There are natures in which, if they love us, we are conscious of having a sort of baptism and consecration: they bind us over to rectitude and purity by their pure belief about us; and our sins become that worst kind of sacrilege which tears down the invisible altar of trust" (771-2). Perhaps the significance of this passage is not initially apparent; however, it demonstrates Dorothea's ability, through her love, to perform metaphorically religious ceremonies of baptism and consecration. Her love, faith, and trust metaphorically wash away the sins--flaws--of others and ultimately validate their very lives. Obviously, Eliot wishes to suggest, foreshadow if you will, that Dorothea, when confirmed into the appropriated

[11] This connection is no mere coincidence, as Jill L. Matus demonstrates in "Saint Teresa, Hysteria, and Middlemarch": "Annie Besant writes in her autobiography about that 'passionate love of the saviour, which among emotional Catholics, really is the human passion of love transferred to an ideal--for women to Jesus, for men to the Virgin Mary'" (230). Even though Eliot does not deal specifically or extensively with Catholicism, the fact that she alludes to its doctrine (references to Saint Theresa included) cannot be overlooked, for they enhance the religious theme that runs throughout the novel.

order, will be a saintly figure. She will be capable of performing such sacramental acts by laying her hands on--handing over her faith to--and embracing those believers.

However, first things first. Dorothea must rid herself of Casaubon's order and reform her belief system. And so we return to the immediate subject at hand, Lydgate's defense. Offering to pay Rosamond a visit on his behalf, Dorothea inadvertently walks in on Rosamond and Will who are engaged in a private conference of sorts. Interestingly enough, Eliot depicts Will's attempt to console and comfort Rosamond by using the hand imagery: "Will leaning towards her clasped both of her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour" (775). The "clasped," "upraised hands," similar to posture of prayer, here seem to suggest more. Will and Rosamond apparently belong to an order of intimacy.

Witnessing this scene and unaware of the extenuating circumstances, Dorothea is shocked. She now believes that the idle rumors about Will and Rosamond have been confirmed in front of her very eyes. And because of this breach of her faith in Will, Dorothea finds herself--might we say due in part to jealousy--unable to carry out her intended visit with Rosamond. Rather, Dorothea merely tells her, "'Excuse me, Mrs Lydgate, the servant did not know that you were here. I called to deliver an important letter for Mr Lydgate, which I wished to put into your hands'" (775). The literal act of placing the letter into Rosamond's hands would serve as a symbolic laying on of hands; Dorothea would have portrayed her willingness and desire to establish a sense of fellowship with Rosamond. Yet, Dorothea is not ready to make such a gesture, and she

instead lays the letter on a small table. Her confirmation into a new order still stands checked.

This faltering of her faith in Will leaves Dorothea very distraught. And yet this traumatic event comes to serve as the necessary catalyst for her awakening of identity, finding of self, establishment of order. When she is finally alone in her own room and able to reflect on the occurrences of the day, Dorothea "pressed her hands hard on the top of her head, and moaned out--'Oh, I did love him!'" (786). Of course, such a gesture is arguably typical of one in distress; however, the significance of this scene cannot be so easily dismissed. Dorothea has finally come to the realization of her true feelings for Will and verbalizes them. Placing her hands on top of her head serves as the symbolic act of self-confirmation and the controlling belief--realization--is love. She has confirmed reality and her own faith for herself and becomes the embodiment of such a belief system--a saint of humanity. This sense of self-confirmation, of being responsible for oneself, symbolically echoes what Louis Weil refers to as the "corporate nature of the Church." Such a nature "points to the coinherence of human life, so that we are in a deeply mysterious way instruments of the salvation of which we are also the beneficiaries" (65). The relationship becomes all the more apparent in Humanism where all sense of value resides in humanity. But what is more, by placing her hands upon her head, Dorothea performs an act of self-ordination, for as The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI, discloses, only with the ordination is it specifically stated that the hands are placed on the head of the participant: "Then shal the Bisshop layinge his handes seuerally upon the head of euery of them" (301).

This confirmation, and ordination (ordering of her life), of her affection is painful and Dorothea suffers considerably that night, for her awareness of her love only comes after she believes Will to be lost from her forever. Within the privacy of her own room and "with a full consciousness which had never awakened before, she stretched out her arms towards him and cried with bitter cries that their nearness was a parting vision: she discovered her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of dispair" (786). This vain gesture of "stretch[ing] out her arms" towards someone who is out of reach epitomizes the distance that has come between Dorothea and Will--a "changed belief" (787). Since her faith and belief in him have been shattered, Dorothea must reconstruct her life, at least her mental and emotional worlds, worlds which comprise a great deal of her reality.

With the onset of a new day, Dorothea awakens to a new consciousness. "[S]he had waked to a new condition: she felt as if her soul had been liberated from its terrible conflict; she was no longer wrestling with her grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts" (787). Acknowledging the changes in her life, Dorothea is now capable of moving on, and such acceptance allows her to objectively reflect on the events of the previous day: "Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life" (787). By shifting her focus from herself to others, Dorothea takes the necessary steps toward leading a life that truly strives to enhance and improve the lives of those around her. Fittingly enough, Dorothea's enlightenment closely resembles the Catechism which precedes Confirmation in The Book of Common Prayer. During this preliminary stage of the ceremony, the bishop asks the individual, "What is thy duty toward God?" The

prescribed response is "to believe in him, and to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength. . . . To put my whole trust in him . . . " The bishop then asks, "What is thy duty toward thy neighbor?" And the response given is "to love him as myself. And to do to all men as I would they should unto me. . . . To hurt nobody by word nor deed. To be true and just in all my dealings. To bear no malice nor hatred in my heart . . ." (286). Shaped by her concern for her fellow man, Dorothea has come to apply these two traditional declarations of faith exclusively to her neighbors, to humanity. She has come to direct her love completely to the divine nature of humanity, which echoes Feuerbach's conception of love: "'Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God . . . , not a visionary, imaginary love--no! a real love, a love which has flesh and blood, which vibrates as an almighty force through all living'" (Haight 137).

Dorothea has begun to reform the traditional order that Casaubon imposed upon her. Perhaps reform does not seem an appropriate term, since there appears to be little of Casaubon's belief system left in Dorothea's emerging system of thought and belief. However, important similarities do exist; the major focus or emphasis has just changed. Both forms reflect the significance of faith, trust, and belief. Yet, the order that Dorothea is assuming in her life places these traits in humanity rather than in a singular divine entity, God.

> She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving--perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (788)

Dorothea has found herself and her order--the order of humanity. Symbolically joining the ranks of the masses, identifying herself with them, she has come to realize the universal commonality of existence and the "mutuality in our lives" (Weil 65). Advocating this interpretation, Bernard Paris asserts that "This is the thematic climax of Middlemarch. Dorothea had become aware of her participation in the life of the species; she had arrived at the Religion of Humanity. Her feelings of alienation were replaced by feelings of connection and commitment at the moment when her personal happiness seemed irrevocably lost. . . . She was joined to others by her sense of community in suffering, by her awareness of the common lot as one of labor and endurance" (190).

As a means of further portraying Dorothea's transformation, Eliot has her shed her mourning clothes--an outward signifier, up until now, of Dorothea's allegiance to Casaubon's order. The nature of this conversion must be stressed however, for celebration and liberation do not characterize the metamorphosis but rather solemness and a strong sense of duty. Well aware of the sacrifices which await her, Dorothea finds herself relying on "the tradition that fresh garments belonged to all initiation" and consequently "grasp[ing] after . . . that slight outward help towards calm resolve. For the resolve was not easy" (789). She has accepted her new responsibilities but the conversion is anything but easy. Why exactly? Dorothea's initiation into this new system of belief is a direct result of her loss of love and faith in another--Will. What is ironic is that Dorothea finally finds herself able to rid herself from the order imposed by Casaubon but the circumstances which bring upon this change actually confirm Casaubon's less than favorable impression of Will. Such irony demonstrates the richness of Eliot's writing and

also the multidimensional aspects of belief and reality (life). And so the true significance in the circumstances leading to Dorothea's conversion resides in the fact that she has *found* her own sense of order. She has not merely relinquished Casaubon's to assume someone else's belief system; Dorothea has established her own, and as stated earlier, she has confirmed *herself* into that religious order, an order which resulted from her realization that she loved Will. Through her ability to be truthful to herself, to truly know herself, Dorothea has found herself, along with the means of helping others.

This new-found ability, complete with selfless motives, beautifully plays itself out in Dorothea's second meeting with Rosamond, a meeting whose purpose was "to see and save Rosamond" (790). Interestingly enough, the initial gestures of both Rosamond and Dorothea that Eliot depicts and focuses on suggest the laying on of hands motif. Rosamond's aloofness, which she displays by "wrapping her soft shawl around her soul in cold reserve," does not stand a chance with Dorothea, whose adjustments to her attire similarly depict her mood and intent: "Dorothea, who had taken off her gloves, from an impulse which she could never resist when she wanted a sense of freedom, came forward, and with her face full of a sad yet sweet openness, put out her hand" (792, 793). Now able to express her feeling of desire for fellowship with Rosamond, Dorothea finds her responsive: "Rosamond could not avoid meeting her glance, could not avoid putting her small hand into Dorothea's which clasped it with gentle motherliness" (793). Once again, Dorothea's hands find themselves described in terms of motherliness, strength, and gentleness. The image Eliot creates of Rosamond's small, petite hand clasped in Dorothea's strong, yet gentle, hand epitomizes the position our heroine has come to hold--

a comforter, protector of sorts. She is well on her way to becoming a saintly figure of humanity, one who embodies sympathy and compassion.

Throughout their visit, Dorothea takes Rosamond's hand and holds it at crucial stages of their conversation: "she had unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before" (795). As would be expected, Dorothea finds herself much moved by the topics at hand and the circumstances under which she is discussing them. And inevitably, her own sense of sorrow and personal loss get the better of her; at this specific moment, Dorothea "pressed her hands helplessly on the hands that lay under them" (797). Exposing herself to be vulnerable, in need of comforting, Dorothea promotes the materialization of the fellowship, for Rosamond "involuntarily" comforts her: "for a minute the two women clasped each other" (797). But the importance and relevancy goes beyond the mere embrace. Rosamond finds herself in need of telling Dorothea the true circumstances of what transpired the day before: "'The blame of what happened is entirely mine'" (798). For the first time in the entire novel, Rosamond assumes responsibility and also places someone else's feelings above her own, and it is Dorothea who makes this possible; Rosamond "had begun her confession under the subduing influence of Dorothea's emotion" (798). Of course, one of Rosamond's motivations in telling Dorothea is so that Will cannot "reproach" her anymore, so one could argue that she is not completely converted by Dorothea. But the degree of her conversion is of little importance in the present context. The significance of the "confession" lies in the simple fact that Dorothea can have such an influence on another person.

And so with Dorothea receiving such a confession--you can be sure that this religiously charged word was not inadvertently chosen by Eliot--the suggestion of Dorothea ultimately being ordained presents itself once again. This likelihood is further supported by the relevancy of the laying on of hands that occurs between Dorothea and Rosamond: "She put out her hand to Rosamond, and they said an earnest, quiet good-bye without kiss or other show of effusion: there had been between them too much serious emotion for them to use the signs of if superficially" (799). Obviously, the hand motif stands as a paramount symbol of their fellowship, one not marred by superficial connotations, for it is the one gesture repeated upon their parting. The Religion of Humanity is realized with both Dorothea and Rosamond offering each other mutual healing and love--a sense of true communion of the souls.

Chapter 4

Hands Joined : Eliot's Order of Humanity Realized

With Will's reputation redeemed (in Dorothea's eyes at least) through Rosamond's testimony, a meeting between Dorothea and Will proves necessary and crucial, for only with such a confrontation can the true nature and magnitude of her conversion be determined. Dorothea has established her own sense of order, one separate from Casaubon's, but will she be able to accept and constructively incorporate Will into this new life of hers?

Although she would like nothing more than to see Will, it is Will who takes the initiative (with the assistance of Miss Noble who serves as a messenger) to meet. Waiting for his arrival, "it was crossing her mind that she could not receive him in this library, where her husband's prohibition seemed to dwell" (806). But their meeting does transpire in this library, Casaubon's sanctuary.[12] Dorothea's desertion of Casaubon's order has not obliterated it; his beliefs still exist even though she no longer owes her allegiance to them. The fact that Dorothea questions the appropriateness of their meeting place demonstrates her uncertainty; after all, as the narrator reveals, "she had a throbbing excitement like an alarm upon her--a sense that she was doing something daringly defiant for his sake" (807). What does Dorothea believe she is defying?--most likely social etiquette and expectations. Perhaps her concern appears to undermine here conversion, and perhaps this is the case, but Eliot's intentions are arguably more involved. Let us not forget, Dorothea is about to see the man that she has finally realized she loves and who presumably loves her, a love

[12] It seems only fitting for such reformations of order and relationship to occur in this room--the new restructuring the old.

specifically forbidden by Casaubon and others. It is only natural that she feel apprehensive, excited, and daring simultaneously, for she is acting "for his sake"; Will's comfort and well-being serve as her primary motivators.

Waiting for Will to appear, "Dorothea stood in the middle of the library with her hands falling clasped before her, making no attempt to compose herself in an attitude of dignified unconsciousness" (807). Clasped hands could obviously be viewed as a typical nervous gesture, but they also beautifully echo the laying on of hands motif. Waiting in anticipation, Dorothea's hand movements reiterate her union with herself and a new order, yet the falling motion emphasizes her present feelings of confusion. Elaborating on this still further, the narrator states that "Dorothea was afraid of her own emotion. She looked as if there was a spell upon her . . . hindering her from unclasping her hands" (807). In order to maintain the small amount of composure that she has managed to muster up, Dorothea finds herself unable to give her hand to Will in a simple gesture of fellowship and friendship. Her clenched hands symbolize the distance which has come to exist between the two.

As Will proceeds to explain himself, "There was a slight movement in Dorothea, and she unclasped her hands, but immediately folded them over each other" (808). Moved by Will's sincerity and her own emotions, Dorothea's movements suggest the possibility of their differences being resolved, however, her uncertainty and reluctance once again surface as she folds her hands on top of each other. No longer clutched, the hands--which symbolically display Dorothea's alliances and sense of unity--offer some hope of ultimate reconciliation between Will and Dorothea, which proves to be the case. As Will continues

to confide in Dorothea, she confesses her renewed belief in him, "putting out her hand" (809). Interestingly enough, the laying on of hands motif has come to represent more than mere fellowship; the exchanges between Dorothea and Will are also romantically rooted.

With the backdrop of a tumultuous storm, complete with thunder and lightning, Will and Dorothea spiritually unite:

> While he was speaking there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other--and the light seemed to be the terror of a hopeless love. Dorothea darted instantaneously from the window; Will followed her, seizing her hand with a spasmodic movement; and so they stood, with their hands clasped, like two children, looking out on the storm, while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them, and the rain began to pour down. Then they turned their faces towards each other, with the memory of his last words in them, and they did not loose each other's hands. (810)

Their union, whose relevancy and power is mirrored through the ensuing storm, also has the mark of innocence, for Will and Dorothea, "with their hands clasped," are likened to "two children." This sense of innocence and purity is not meant to be taken lightly though, for it has transcended numerous hardships and delivered their love unscathed. Surely Will and Dorothea's affection for one another will see them through the storm of the "drear outer world" (810). After all, as the two lovers part after exchanging their first kiss, Dorothea sits down and gazes out of the window. Her momentary absorption in the "drear outer world" serves as a reminder of her connection with it, but not at the expense of weakening or jeopardizing her bond with Will. The laying on of hands once again verifies Dorothea's religious leanings: "Will . . . seated himself beside her, and laid his hand on hers, which turned itself upward to be clasped" (810-11). Through this single gesture, Dorothea comes to include Will in her order of belief.

In fact, she is also largely responsible for his permanent inclusion in her life, for Dorothea suggests and ultimately takes the actions--some would say, sacrifices--necessary for their matrimonial union by forfeiting much of her wealth. Their love has been incorporated into the Religion of Humanity; or more accurately, their marriage comes to epitomize the union sought in the humanistic order. For, as Feuerbach puts forth in The Essence of Christianity, "marriage--we mean, of course, marriage as the free bond of love--is sacred in itself, by the very nature of the union which is therein effected. That alone is a religious marriage, which is a true marriage, which corresponds to the essence of marriage--of love" (271). As Gordon Haight discloses in George Eliot: A Biography, Eliot was extremely attracted to Feuerbach's "daring conception of love," the nature of love described in the previous passage.

> 'Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God . . . , not a visionary, imaginary love--no! a real love, a love which has flesh and blood, which vibrates as an almighty force through all living.' [Eliot] agreed wholeheartedly with Feuerbach's distinction between 'self-interested love' and 'the true human love', which 'impels the sacrifice of self to another.' Such love is, and must always be, particular and limited, finding its expression in the sexual relation, the frankest recognition of the divine in Nature. (137)

Obviously, Eliot had such a belief in mind when describing Will and Dorothea's joining of hands in holy matrimony: "They were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it" (835).

Although Eliot depicts this union in a very positive light and concludes Middlemarch on such a note, which suggests all the more that Dorothea's religious development and her quest for such a belief system have been realized and embodied in her love for Will, their marriage serves as perhaps the most controversial aspect of the

novel. Deeming Will as not worthy of Dorothea, many readers view the union with disappointment, verging on disdain.[13] However, if we examine our heroine's life with her husband through the religious lens that Eliot has developed and advocated throughout the novel, then it becomes clear that Dorothea's integrity of character has been maintained. After all, it is through her union with Will, the taking of his hand, that the Religion of Humanity manifests itself fully, allowing Dorothea to accomplish her goal of "making life beautiful" for others, of bettering and advancing humanity through her example (219). Her impact on Will goes without saying, for as T. R. Wright asserts, "Her love of Will Ladislaw . . . is a 'sort of baptism and consecration', which actually makes him behave better"--better in the humanistic sense (145). Influenced by Dorothea's love and faith, Will directs his energies toward social concerns, becoming "an ardent public man" (836).[14] Thus, although Dorothea does not come to actively engage in such undertakings herself, she "could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help" (836).

Perhaps this fate does not appear good enough for Dorothea. Why should such an exquisite soul resort to the typical roles of wife and mother? Although the text itself arguably invites this form of inquiry, the question completely overlooks the issue of order and happiness. Throughout the entire novel, Dorothea has been searching for a sense of

---

[13] As U. C. Knoepflmacher points out, "Will Ladislaw has always disturbed those readers of Middlemarch who, after the manner of Leslie Stephen, find the 'young gentleman' to be 'conspicuously unworthy of the affections of a Saint Theresa'" (96).

[14] On this subject, K. M. Newton asserts, in George Eliot: Romantic Humanist, that "Dorothea's ardent desire to do some good in the world . . . [is one of] the most important factor in making him give up his rootless existence and involve himself in society. Her idealistic conception of him becomes part of his sense of self, and the need to earn her respect brings out tendencies in himself that might otherwise have been overwhelmed by his attraction to egoistic Romantic attitudes" (136-7).

order, a means in which to live her life in a meaningful manner. By joining hands with Will, she has found that order, complete with the all-important elements of love and faith. She has finally "[found] out [her] religion"--a religion she has been searching for and discovering ever since she was a little girl (392). The fact that "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" merely reiterates the need for religious reform. The majority of her peers are unable to recognize what Dorothea has accomplished because they are unfamiliar with the whole notion of the Religion of Humanity. They have yet to be touched by her hand of humanity.

Regardless of whether those whose lives were touched by Dorothea's were aware of her influence, the narrator tells us in the concluding lines of Middlemarch that "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" (838). Just one person can have a positive impact on humanity. Through such a characterization, Eliot offers a way of life, a reformed system of belief, which by focusing on humanity allows, even requires, all members to actively participate. As T. R. Wright points out , Middlemarch "presents a world unredeemed by revelation in which religious needs must be met by entirely human means" (151). Thus, the end that Dorothea meets, helping and living through others (which is one of the tenants of humanism--the trait of selflessness), allows her to fulfill the requirements for the Religion of Humanity. Also, such a fate encourages others to follow her example. Through Dorothea's characterization, Eliot provides her contemporaries with a replacement for, a reforming of, traditional religious belief and order. This

restructuring of ideology and faith is truly universal in its scope, for it is of and for the masses--humanity.

Thus, in a time of immense technological, philosophical, and theological change, George Eliot provides her readers with a constructive means of redirecting their faith, in one another. The need for religious reformation seems self-evident to Eliot:

> "I believe that religion too has to be modified--'developed,' according to the dominant phrase--and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to men, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot." (Karl 456)

Believing in the necessity and inevitability of theological evolution, Eliot builds upon and reforms religious tradition. As we have seen with the sacraments, the laying on of hands, a sense of continuity and connectedness with humanity, both past and present, can exist. By taking such a recognizable religious gesture and manipulating its meaning, she assumes her position in the long tradition of religious reformation. Most importantly, Eliot demonstrates how order and purpose can be maintained in a changing world, how more secular beliefs can take on familiar theological forms and function in a similar manner, how faith can be reconfigured, and how embracing humanity with open arms--confirming oneself into the Religion of Humanity--makes such reformation not only permissible, but personally rewarding and socially successful.

Bibliography

Baillie, Donald M. The Theology of the Sacraments. New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1957.

Booty, John E. , ed. The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1976.

Court, Franklin E. "The Image of St. Theresa in Middlemarch and Positive Ethics." The Victorian Newsletter 63 (Spring 1983): 21-25.

Daniel, Evan. The Prayer-Book: Its History, Language, and Contents. London: Wells, Gardner, Darton & CO., 1936.

Eliot, George. Middlemarch. 1871. Ed. Rosemary Ashton. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

Feuerbach, Ludwig. The Essence of Christianity. Trans. Marian Evans. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & CO. Ltd., 1893.

Freedman, David Noel, ed. The Anchor Bible Dictionary. Vol. 3. New York: Doubleday, 1992. 6 vols..

Haight, Gordon. George Eliot: A Biography. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

Jenkins, Ruth Y. Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and Victorian Spiritual Crisis. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1995.

Karl, Frederick R. George Eliot: Voice of a Century. New York: Norton & Company, 1995.

Knoepflmacher, U. C. Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater, and Samuel Butler. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965.

Matus, Jill L. "Saint Teresa, Hysteria, and Middlemarch." Journal of the History of Sexuality 1.2 (1990): 215-40.

McSweeney, Kerry. Middlemarch. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984.

Newton, K. M. George Eliot: Romantic Humanist. Totowa: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981.

Paris, Bernard J. Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965.

Rhys, Ernest., ed. The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company Inc., 1910.

Warkentin, Marjorie. Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982.

Weil, Louis. Sacraments and Liturgy. London: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Wolff, Robert Lee. Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977.

Wright, T. R. "Middlemarch as a Religious Novel, or Life without God." Images of Belief in Literature. Ed. David Jasper. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. 138-51.